

# Five Steps to the Stage

By Jerry Leake

This article focuses on the development of musical maturity needed to step onto the stage and perform with confidence and skill. In today's hectic society, students often fail to realize that they have not completed the five necessary steps to perform at the highest level. Playing music is difficult. It is supposed to be difficult—otherwise, everyone would be doing it and no one would be great. But music must also be fun. By understanding and adhering to the five steps outlined in this article, students can always find the joy in their art and always perform at the highest level. The five steps are:

- 1: Being taught a lesson
- 2: Learning the lesson
- 3: Practicing the lesson
- 4: Rehearsing with others
- 5: Reaching the stage

Before engaging in Step 1, the student must first earn the trust and love of a qualified teacher. One must be respectful, responsible, and dedicated to practicing whatever the teacher asks. American students often request that they be taught specific techniques, concepts, and patterns; however, this bold approach will not earn the devotion of a teacher from other traditions. One prospective student said it would take ten years to learn to play the tabla. My reply, "What else are you going to do for those ten years?" did little to alter his attitude.

Time was invented so we do not have to do everything all at once. By taking small steps with daily practice, giant leaps can be achieved. This requires patience and hard work. With a qualified teacher as a trusted guide, the students are ready to take the first step.

## STEP 1: BEING TAUGHT A LESSON

At the end of a student's initial lesson I always say: "The first lesson is the easiest, the second is the hardest." New students arrive with no idea of what they will learn and execute in the lesson. They act as sponges, soaking in information and exercises. They are not expected to do anything except pay attention and try. Trying, after all, is the best and only thing the student can do.

The second lesson is the hardest because of the teacher's expectation that the student will return with the material well prepared. How the student practices between the first and second lesson sets the stage for the entire learning

process. With a solid model of daily work, the student can achieve anything. However, if the second lesson is unsatisfactory, the teacher and student are off to a negative start.

After every lesson I advise students to revisit the material in their practice space before the end of the day. Any serious student can find the few minutes needed to refresh the lesson. Without this, the material begins to slip away and depreciate like a new car driven off the lot. If the lesson was not recorded, specific information quickly fades from memory, confusion sets in, and a downward spiral begins.

## STEP 2: LEARNING THE LESSON

Being taught a lesson and having *learned* a lesson are entirely different topics. With so many techniques, sounds, and material introduced, students are often overloaded and return unprepared, having not properly absorbed and

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digested the previous lesson. Complete learning is achieved when there are no more questions asked of the teacher—when the student no longer needs to review notes or transcriptions.

I ask students to describe their practice routine during the week, probing for their insights and revelations that tell me they have completed the work. Eager students want to experiment and "jam" beyond the guidelines of the lesson. There is nothing wrong with pushing the envelope to find a unique voice; however, a lack of discipline can do more harm than good. A productive regime is one that engages different aspects of the instrument and music.

Here are five focus categories I use in my teaching:

- a. Sound: Developing the ear to understand the difference between good and bad sound production. I always play the students' drums to show them the rich, potent sound. No tricks or mysteries, just tuned awareness.
- b. Technique: Understanding the physics of the hand and body for achieving total relaxation and endurance. With good technique comes good sound.
- c. Material: Drilling specific exercises and compositions that demand focused atten-

tion. Sometimes sound and technique suffer because the student is often distracted by complex compositions and memorization. Be careful.

- d. Rhythm theory: Recitation/singing of the material while clapping the beat. Also standing and moving to the pulse during recitation and clapping.
- e. Jam, explore, invent: Once items a–d are completed, go for it! Push the envelope of technique and invention, but avoid radical changes in motion and sound production. Unlearning bad habits is more difficult than starting over.

## STEP 3: PRACTICING THE LESSON

This is where the work truly begins and ends. *Riaz* is the Hindi word for practice. It was the single-word response that the great tabla master Swapan Chaudhuri said to me when I asked if it were possible for non-Indians to achieve the highest level of performance on Indian drums. Success is achieved by enduring the good and bad results of daily practice. I have deconstructed my practice routines numerous times and will continue to break

down the essentials until I have eliminated all doubts and insecurity. In music, practice does make perfect.

With stages 1 and 2 achieved, students are left to their own devices and desires to master the material. The phrase "effortless mastery" (the title of Kenny Werner's great book) aptly describes this stage of the work. After years of intensive practice and sacrifice, one can master the effortlessness of getting around on the instrument, and inside the material. This does not imply that one has mastered the instrument or tradition. It means that complete relaxation, control, clarity of sound and composition will support the musician through any performance.

In the context of Indian music there is an intensive stage of practice called "chilla." During a chilla, the student is fully isolated from the outside world and lives for music only. In the traditional context this can last up to forty days and nights of continuous practice. Successful completion is thought to have the power of transforming not only the student's music, but his whole life.

Today's busy artist must contend with family obligations, rehearsals, gigs, and teaching. Therefore, it is not possible to engage in six weeks of isolated practice. A modified chilla can

include anything that is done for forty consecutive days. Practicing from 2:00–3:00 P.M. every day without interruption is an example. The point is to establish a daily routine that is comfortable and reliable. Practice is like exercise: If you skip a day of exercise it becomes increasingly difficult to get back on the treadmill. A day goes by very fast and can quickly turn into weeks and months. It does not matter if it takes ten years to achieve positive results.

#### STEP 4: REHEARSING WITH OTHERS

Fortunately, all the guest artists who have played with my world-music bands have always been well prepared. They are consummate professionals who understand the entire music process. No one wants to waste the valuable time of others, nor does one want to look foolish for lack of preparation.

I also make sure that I am equally prepared for any freelance gigs or recordings. I am not too proud to record rehearsals for an upcoming event. During busy periods I may be studying the music of several artists, listening back to occasional stumbles during early rehearsals, knowing that the next time we meet I will not make the same mistakes. Percussionists often generate their own ideas and instrument selection, so the rehearsal stage is critical to discovering the rhythmic harmony you can add to the music.

Rehearsal = re-hears-all. By carefully study-

ing the rehearsal process you can achieve superior results.

#### STEP 5: REACHING THE STAGE

Get up there and play! You have prepared the material and have been properly guided by a teacher, whose voice in the back of your mind helps to stabilize the ground beneath your musical feet. By trusting in your skills you can truly enjoy yourself. I do not pat myself on the back for a good performance, or punish myself for a bad one. Music is about process, not product. Artistic faith—being true to oneself and the music—is the mantra of every aspiring musician.

#### CONCLUSION

By understanding your own process in the first four steps to the stage—private lesson, personal learning and discovery, disciplined practice, and prepared rehearsal—you will be able to step onto the stage with confidence, skill, and the humility to serve the needs of the music. To quote percussionist and colleague Jamey Haddad, “The audience does not care about what you play or how much technique you may have, they only care about how your music makes them feel.”

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